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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 001823

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DEPT FOR DRL A/S LOWENKRON FROM AMBASSADOR DERSE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: UPDATED SCENESETTER FOR DRL A/S LOWENKRON'S
DECEMBER 17-20 VISIT TO AZERBAIJAN

REF: A. BAKU 1720

[1](#)B. BAKU 1659
[1](#)C. BAKU 1811
[1](#)D. BAKU 1777

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse per 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Barry, I deeply appreciate your rescheduling your visit and your willingness to lead a serious and sustained dialogue with Azerbaijan in support of its democratic development. Progress on political and economic reform is a key element in our bilateral relationship and essential if we are to engage Azerbaijan as fully as we should in light of the broad range of important interests we share. President Aliyev and his senior advisors assure us that Azerbaijan remains committed to its policy of Euro-Atlantic integration and to its commitments on democracy as spelled out by the OSCE and the Council of Europe and included in Azerbaijan's NATO International Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) and new EU Action Plan. Events such as the recent two and half week suspension of Azerbaijan's leading independent broadcaster (now resumed), simultaneous eviction of an opposition party and other media outlets from their downtown offices and continuing restrictions on freedom of assembly point to a gap between Azerbaijan's stated policy of democratization and Western integration and the reality in practice, however. We need to work with President Aliyev to help him understand the need to address this gap in the interest of Azerbaijan's development and of a strong bilateral relationship, and to help him identify the best approach to do so, with our full support.

[1](#)2. (C) Azerbaijan's political environment is dominated by openly hostile and personally vindictive relations between the leaders of the GOAJ and the major opposition parties. President Aliyev recently told me that Azerbaijan "has no political process" or consensus on a national agenda or development goals. He decries this situation, which he largely blames on opposition leaders whom he says are driven by personal political agendas, who refuse to permit new talent to emerge and who are "uncivilized" in their tactics, using "intimidation, illegal actions, and attempts to provoke disorder" as methods of political struggle. Opposition leaders in turn blame the lack of political process on the GOAJ, arguing that the GOAJ falsified results in the November 2005 elections and, since then, has systematically denied the opposition the means to participate legitimately in the political process by limiting media freedom and freedom of assembly. Following the November 2005 parliamentary

elections, all major opposition parties except Musavat have, in fact, boycotted participation in parliament and elections.

Azerbaijan's highly partisan press -- described by Reporters Without Borders as "dominated by government and opposition mouthpieces" -- for the most part simply reflects and exacerbates the poisonous political climate.

13. (C) For Azerbaijan to have a healthy political process, this impasse needs to be broken. The GOAJ needs to open space for opposition parties, civil society, a truly independent media and citizens to exercise their rights and participate fully in existing democratic institutions. The opposition must be willing to participate in the process. In discussing your upcoming visit, President Aliyev told me that he fully supports dialogue and consensus on national objectives for political and economic development, and that he is open to normalizing relations with the opposition. He also asked specifically for U.S. help in "developing these political processes" in Azerbaijan (ref d). Aliyev subsequently went public last week with a call for dialogue between the opposition and ruling parties. Senior ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party official Ali Ahmadov has told us the opposition has now agreed to explore this dialogue without any conditions. This is a positive and potentially significant development. In order to succeed, it will require ruling and opposition parties alike to put aside their habitual personal attacks in favor of engaging in a competition of ideas and alternative visions of Azerbaijan's development and governance.

14. (C) Your visit provides a crucial opportunity to explore the real possibilities for helping to "develop the political processes" and democratic institutions in Azerbaijan. Together, I hope we can probe the GOAJ, opposition, and civil

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society on the root causes of the current impasse and encourage identification of the right policy prescriptions and concrete next steps. Change will be neither quick nor easy. Azerbaijan's weak democratic progress is symptomatic of many deeply rooted, systemic weaknesses that continue to plague this post-Soviet society. We need to remember that we began to offer significant assistance in political and economic development to Azerbaijan ten years later than in other post-Soviet states, and that recent pressures and open threats from Russia and Iran have alarmed Azerbaijanis across the political spectrum, providing excuses for delay to those who oppose the GOAJ's western and democratic orientation and leading even those who support democratic change to note that it must be approached "carefully." Nonetheless, recent discussions with President Aliyev suggest that there is a real opportunity to work constructively to establish a results-focused dialogue to promote and support long-term democratic change in Azerbaijan, based on our shared interest in peaceful, democratic development in a strategic region under pressure from those supporting a different path. My team and I look forward to your visit.

DERSE